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The System Did It

The Reagan administration has dumped a full load of government ret-
ribution on a Navy civilian analyst who
slipped three satellite photos of a
Soviet aircraft carrier to a British
magazine. He faces 40 years in prison
if convicted of espionage charges.

But when an Air Force general
showed Congress photos of equal in-
terest to the Kremlin and they were
mistakenly released to the public, no
one drew so much as a tut-tut.

Why the double standard? That's
what we'd like to know.

The Navy analyst is Samuel Loring
Morison, who moonlighted for the Brit-
ish magazine with the Navy's full knowl-
edge. He's a grandson of the late author
and admiral, Samuel Eliot Morison, who
wrote the definitive history of U.S. naval
actions in World War II.

In the first place, the espionage laws
were never intended to make publica-
tion of classified information a crime. In
fact, Congress has repeatedly refused to
pass such a restriction, knowing that a
corrupt administration could cover up
its misdeeds by stamping "secret" on
embarrassing information.

What makes the administration's
vendetta against Morison additionally
outrageous is the Pentagon's failure to
take any action against those responsi-
ble for a similar disclosure about a
year earlier. Two photographs
released by the Pentagon told the
Soviets everything they needed to
know about the capability of U.S. spy
satellites to photograph Soviet weap-
ons on the ground or under construc-
tion.

The furor over Morison began last
August when Defense Secretary Cas-
par Weinberger opened "Jane's De-
fence Weekly" and saw three U.S.
satellite photos of a new Soviet air-
craft carrier under construction. The
magazine is an offshoot of the 14 au-
thoritative Jane's books on military
hardware published each year.

Rewriting the espionage laws and
brushing aside the First Amendment,
the federal prosecutor said Morison
had damaged his country's interests
by making available "information that
foreign analysts could derive from
these photographs concerning the
capabilities of American intelligence-
gathering methods, as well as Amer-
ican targeting priorities."

In other words, publication of the
photos tipped the Russians off that we
were targeting the Black Sea shipyard
where the carrier was being built.

This line of reasoning assumes that
the Soviets are so stupid they wouldn't
realize U.S. intelligence would be in-
terested in their first large-deck carri-
er. In fact, our sources assure us, the
Soviets routinely cover up their equip-
ment when U.S. spy satellites pass
overhead.

As to the "capabilities" argument,
the government claims the Soviets
can't determine the clarity and quality
of satellite photographs that are offi-
cially released because the Pentagon
deliberately makes them fuzzy and less
detailed.

Actually, our sources say, the Sovi-
ets have an excellent idea of the clar-
ity of U.S. satellite photographs—
thanks to the non-fuzzed, free-for-the-
taking copies of the Air Force photos
mistakenly released in 1983.

This incredible episode occurred
after a properly closed hearing on de-
fense appropriations before the House
Armed Services Committee on April
6, 1983. An Air Force general's testi-
mony included "vu-graphs" of new
Soviet aircraft—the SU27 Flanker
and the MiG29 Fulcrum fighter
planes.

When a Pentagon-declassified ac-
count of the hearing was released,
Soviet military attaches' eyes must
have popped. There were clear, de-
tailed overhead photographs of their
two secret planes. They could tell
what time of day the pictures had been
taken, from the shadows beneath the
planes, and they could identify the air-
field that had been "targeted" by the
U.S. spy satellite.

In other words, the Soviets could
tell precisely the same things that
Morison was accused of enabling them
to find out a year later: capability and
targeting.

Yet nobody was reprimanded for
this. An investigation concluded that
the "system" was to blame, and as
everyone in Washington knows, no
one can be held responsible for the
system.